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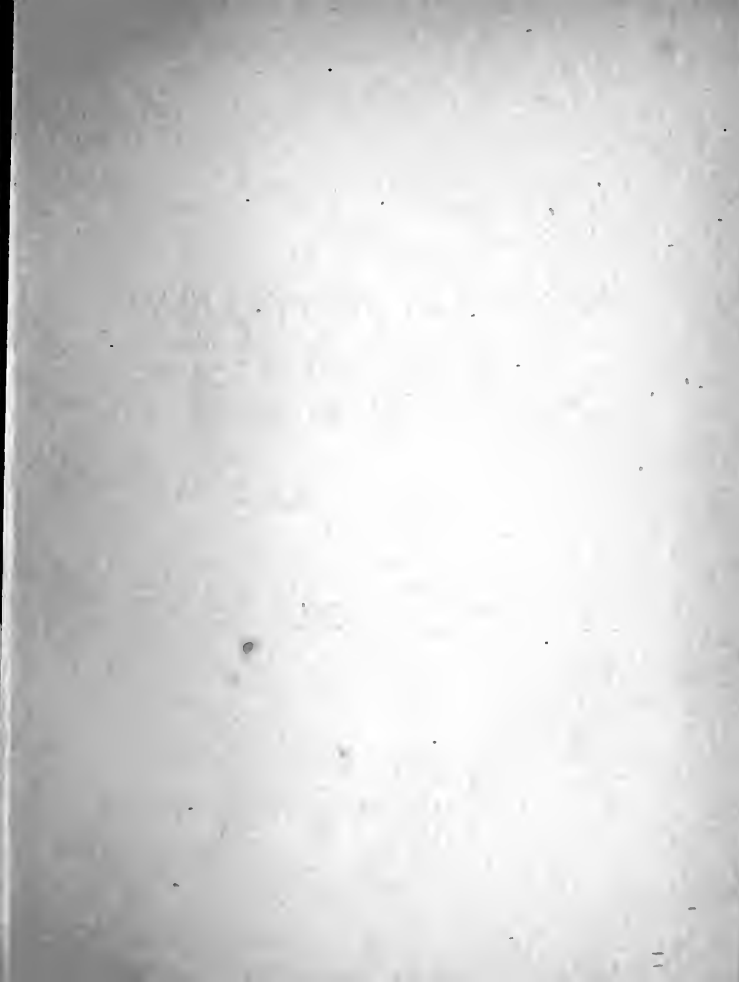
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Herbert Whistler,

1 November 1883.





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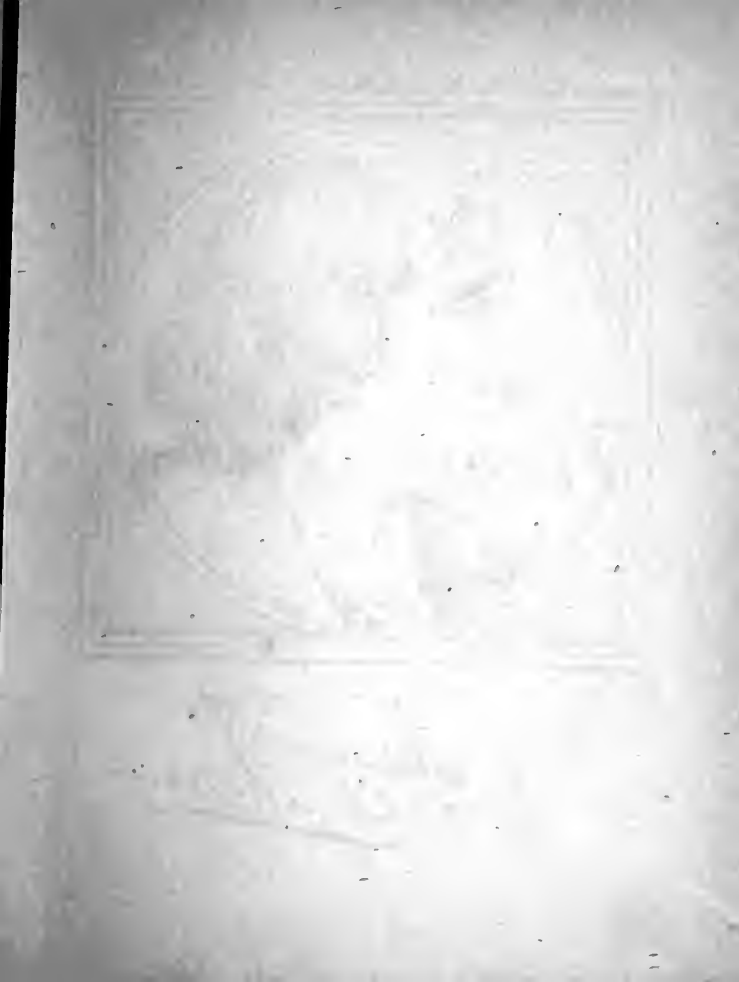


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# HENRY IRVING

*Actor and Manager*

## A CRITICAL STUDY

BY

WILLIAM ARCHER

*Author of "English Dramatists of To-day."*

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c 1883



# HENRY IRVING,

ACTOR AND MANAGER

## I.

THE future biographer of Mr. Henry Irving will probably have to close with the autumn of 1883 one period of his hero's career. The third period it may be called, if we reckon Mr. Irving's earliest efforts in the Provinces and in London as the first, and the Bateman management at the Lyceum as the second. This third period, then, comprises the five years of Mr. Irving's own management. His contemplated visit to America will form a break long and important enough to mark a new

chapter in his career. Epoch-making it will hardly be. His tour is not likely to produce much effect, for better or worse, on Mr. Irving's art. Travelling with his own company, his own scenery, his own appointments of every sort, he will in effect carry with him his own Lyceum from the orchestra backwards. Only the auditorium and its occupants will be changed; and if the visit were to be prolonged over years instead of months this change might be all-important. In the course of a winter tour, however, he will scarcely have the time, even if he had the will, to adapt his style to the changed conditions. I am not prepared to say that a prolonged separation from his Lyceum audiences—and his Lyceum critics—might not have a beneficial effect upon Mr. Irving's art. It is useless to speculate one way or the other, for on separation long enough seriously to influence his style is likely to take place. Any "Yankee notions" he may bring



back with him will probably be confined to stage-mechanism or arrangements for the comfort of his audiences. Thus the importance of the present break in his career is in all likelihood purely external. It concerns not his artistic development but his managerial policy. Still it affords a point of rest, as it were, for a retrospect of the few but eventful and significant years of his management. It suggests a summing up of his achievements and an attempt to define his true position in our art-world of to-day.

## II.

ACTING, like all other arts, says George Henry Lewes, "is obstructed by a mass of unsystematized opinion, calling itself criticism." He might have gone further and pointed out that acting, more than any other art, is subject to this disadvantage, since it is trebly difficult to systematize opinion concerning it. A critic of sculpture, of painting, of music, of poetry, can have ever before him the masterpieces from which his critical canons are generalized. He can go to work both inductively and deductively. He evolves from his inner consciousness the idea of what art *should* be : he looks backward through the centuries and learns what art *has* been : and a compromise between the two gives him his standard of what art *can*

be under existing conditions, teaches him what he may reasonably demand of the artist of the present. It is his own fault if his opinions remain unsystematized, mere impressions of the moment. If he has the perceptive faculty presupposed in all criticism, the formation of a rational standard becomes a mere matter of study. The materials are at his hand: he can formulate a faith and give his reasons for it. With the critic of acting the case is different. Each individual, or at any rate each generation, has to form a new ideal, unaided by the ideals and achievements of the past. Suppose that all the paintings then in the world had suddenly faded at the beginning, say, of this century; suppose our whole knowledge of Italian, Spanish, German, and Flemish art, nay, of Reynolds and Hogarth themselves, had to be gathered from printed descriptions; how empiric would our art criticism be, how utterly given over to individual mood and whim! It would

be in the position of a judge with neither statute-law nor case-law to guide him, but at best some vague maxims of theoretical jurisprudence. It would err in two directions. Some critics would form an ideal of what painting might conceivably be, disregarding its material conditions, and pinning their faith to misunderstood and hyperbolical descriptions of vanished masterpieces. Others would be content to make an ideal of the actual, would accept the banalities of the day as all that could be desired, and might not improbably allow their judgment to be influenced by the size of the canvas and the splendour of the frame. A few general rules of perspective and composition would help but little. Art criticism would be lost in vague theorizing on the one hand and conventional reporting on the other. And is not this the very tragedy of acting—that its greatest triumphs, as well as its merest failures, fade even as they come into

being and leave not a wrack behind? The Raphaels and Tintorets, the Dürers and Rembrandts of acting are names and nothing more. We have descriptive catalogues of their achievements, but the achievements themselves are beyond our study and safe from our criticism. To try to reconstruct them from description is futile, since we cannot tell what shades of meaning the critics of the day attached to their epithets. We read Hamlet's admonition to the players with thorough agreement, because we interpret his terms according to our own preconceptions. Disputes as to what Shakespeare meant by "the modesty of nature," "mouthing," "temperance," "smoothness," &c., would be as barren as controversies on the colour-epithets in Homer. One has an unpleasant suspicion that if Burbage could come to life again he would be more likely to find an engagement in the East-end than in the West, and that Betterton would be consigned

to the Provinces as stilted and stagey past endurance. Even if Garrick redivivus were announced to make his re-appearance at Drury Lane, I, for my part, should look forward to the occasion with more nervousness than confidence. All we really know about the great actors of the past is the effect they produced upon their audiences. That they commanded laughter and tears, and called forth wonder and enthusiasm, is plenteously attested. But one age is moved to ecstasy where another would be bored or disgusted. We know how Cimabue's Virgin enraptured the Florentines, so that

“ Even the place

Containing such a miracle, grew bold,

Named the Glad Borgo from that beauteous face.”

Were we left to reconstruct the picture on the basis of the enthusiasm it excited, we should imagine it a glorified Sistine Madonna, instead of the almond-eyed Byzantine giantess with “stiff draperies and loose joints” who darkens

the dark chapel of Santa Maria Novella. The enthusiasm excited by this or that actor of the past may be deceptive in the same way, and in any case forms no criterion of absolute merit. As providing material for an inductive critical standard, the great actors of the eighteenth century are of scarcely more use to us than the great actors of the twentieth.

This is one reason why criticism of acting is, and must be, more empirical than criticism of the other arts. We have to form our own standard from the art of our own generation. Even if we have had the luck to see all the best acting of the time, our basis of experience remains comparatively narrow. Some of us are apt to insist on an unattainable ideal; others—and this is a commoner error—come to accept convention for nature, rant for passion, and eccentricity for originality. As years go on our experience no doubt widens, but a halo of pleasant associations is apt to form around the

memories of our youth and give them an undue charm in our eyes. Time filters our impressions for us—we forget all that was mean and mistaken, and remember only that this actor or that moved or amused us at a time when tears flowed lightly and it was easier to laugh than to be grave. We cannot test our own recollections of actors of the past, any more than we can test the descriptions of Lamb and Hazlitt. Moreover, the vague sympathies and antipathies which come into play whenever one human being is brought into personal relation with another, form a disturbing element in our criticism from which we are exempt in dealing with the other arts. Many a critical Areopagus has had its judgment stayed by the beauty of a Phryne; but actual beauty and ugliness are not the subtlest or most dangerous of these influences, because we are more or less on our guard against them. Indefinable trifles of accent and manner, the curve of an eyebrow



or the quiver of a lip, a likeness so faint that we do not consciously note it, yet strong enough to awaken a host of vague associations—these are the unseen currents which sweep our judgment this way or that, and prevent it from answering the helm of reason.

“Things of no moment, colour of the hair  
Shape of a leg, complexion brown or fair,  
A dress well chosen, or a patch misplaced  
Conciliate favour or create distaste.”

Thus opinion on acting must necessarily be more tentative, or, if I may use the word, more subjective, than on any other art. It is less reducible to rule, while such rules as have been formulated are harder to apply with impartiality and precision. And, conversely, there is no art on which so many people have an itching to utter the most confident opinions. In the first place, there is a common but mistaken idea that the experience and observation of any intelligent adult are sufficient to provide him with an in-

fallible standard of what is or is not "natural." People will grant that some knowledge of perspective is required for the criticism of paintings, but in acting, they think, there is no such convention to be taken into account. They will allow that some study of anatomy is necessary before one can authoritatively criticise the muscular modelling of a statue, but acting is not concerned with such technical details. They do not see that the actor, concentrating life upon his little stage, is working under conditions quite as conventional as the painter who places the horizon and the pole-star upon his square yard of flat canvas. They will not admit that the mobile muscles of the actor require at least as delicate observation as the statue's rigid lines, if we are to form any valid opinion as to the truth of the effect produced by them. Thus there is a doubly strong tendency in dealing with acting to translate "This pleases me" into "This is good," "That displeases me"

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into "That is bad." And the very vividness of the effect of acting compels the expression of opinion. In revenge for its evanescence, it gives us for the moment greater pleasure or pain than any other art, except perhaps music. We may walk through miles of art galleries without any very potent sensation of satisfaction or the reverse. Even when we particularly admire a picture we do not applaud and shout and wave handkerchiefs, but at most make a cross in our catalogues and buy a photograph of it. In the theatre, on the other hand, we enjoy or suffer vividly, and feel a natural craving to find fitting expression for our emotion. The muscular action of applause or hissing, handing bouquets or throwing orange-peel, does not satisfy us. We declaim, discuss, describe and imitate. We write letters to the actors and sonnets to the actresses. We envy the professional critic who can pour forth his soul through the far-resonant mouthpiece of the Press, feeling convinced that

were we in his place we could say something far more to the purpose. Acting, in short, produces a physical effect upon us which somehow issues in the confident expression of definite opinion to an extent unknown in the other arts. It is the old paradox—we are surer of our prejudices than of our best-grounded judgments, and will stake our credit on a whim rather than on a mathematical demonstration.

## III.

THIS enumeration, incomplete as it is, of the difficulties which beset the criticism of acting, may seem a strange opening for a critical study of an eminent actor. I intend it in a measure as an apology for what is to follow, but more particularly as an indication of what I do, and do not, mean to attempt. Interpretation, rather than criticism properly so called, is my purpose. Regarding Mr. Irving and his theatre as "accomplished facts" of no small importance in the world of art, I wish to examine a little into the relation in which they stand towards other phenomena in the same sphere. Distinguishing between Mr. Irving the actor and Mr. Irving the manager, I wish to inquire how, in these two capacities, he has raised the Lyceum to

the position it at present occupies. I wish to diagnose the two diseases of Irving-mania and Irving-phobia which are raging among the public, the former endemic, the latter sporadic, but none the less violent where it does break out. Shunning the contagion of these almost equally pestilent heresies, I wish to suggest the conditions of a sane and healthy criticism. In short, I do not desire to force my personal impressions upon my reader, but rather to lead him to test and analyse his own. I shall not feel myself bound to decry Mr. Irving because he is not Edmund Kean and Macready in one, or because he is not the ideal tragedian of my dreams; nor shall I proclaim him the greatest actor of all time because he spends £200 on a tableau-curtain, and contributes to the *Nineteenth Century*. I do not hold a brief for either the prosecution or the defence; rather I would attempt to report concisely the pleadings on both sides, so that

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the emphatic award of the jury—the great public which flocks nightly to the Lyceum—may be explained, if not justified, to those whose opinion tends in the opposite direction.

## IV.

IT is scarcely too much to say that the Lyceum is as prominent an element in the social life of London as the Théâtre Français in that of Paris. As prominent, not as important—for the drama of the past, of which the Lyceum repertory is almost exclusively composed, can never grasp and mould the thoughts of men as do the vivid pictures of contemporary life presented from time to time in the Rue Richelieu. Still, the productions at the Lyceum excite almost as much discussion, and occupy almost as large a space in the mind of cultivated London. Fifteen years ago the intelligent foreigner, reporting upon the intellectual life of England, would have felt himself justified



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in altogether omitting the theatre from his survey; now he could no more overlook Mr. Irving and Miss Ellen Terry than Tieck in 1817 could overlook John Kemble and Miss O'Neill. Indeed, the Lyceum probably influences a wider range of thought than did the patent theatres of those days, for puritanic prejudice against the stage, everywhere rapidly on the decline, has almost vanished with respect to that house in particular. An amusement which was formerly "worse than wicked — vulgar," has now become better than respectable — fashionable. But the Lyceum is more than fashionable, it is popular. There is probably no artistic institution in England which unites all classes as it does. The whole social menagerie of Du Maurier may be seen any evening in the stalls: the Duke and Duchess of Stilton, Sir Gorgius and Lady Midas, Mr. and Mrs. Ponsonby de Tompkins, Maudle, Postlethwaite, and Mrs. Cimabue Brown.

Artists, men of science, men of letters, churchmen and soldiers, dons of the universities, magnates of the city, notables of the bench and bar, meet there on common ground; and even the "masher" sometimes strays across from the other side of Wellington Street. The intelligent foreigner is there as a matter of course, and the non-intelligent foreigner, the Prince of Crim Tartary or the Ambassador from Cariboo, is taken to the Lyceum just as to the House of Lords or Madame Tussaud's. Brompton and Bayswater congregate in the dress-circle, Camberwell and Kentish Town in the upper boxes. In the unreserved places, beneath the salt, as it were, at the intellectual feast, gather all who are not included in the above enumeration—the community as opposed to society. Brown, Jones, and Robinson, Tom, Dick, and Harry, are there—aye, even 'Arry with his 'Arriet, though not Mr. Irving, but the accomplished manager of Drury Lane, is 'Arry's favourite tragedian.

Thus the whole of our modern London, not merely a play-going class, is attracted to the Lyceum; and the attraction is not temporary or fitful but constant. The moment Mr. Irving finds his electro-magnet becoming feeble, he sends a fresh current of electricity through the coil, and not iron but gold rushes together in piles, responsive to the subtle influence. The Lyceum is a recognised institution in London life. A periodical visit to it has become a matter of habit. Were it suddenly to vanish away, its loss would impoverish the small talk, if not eclipse the gaiety, of the whole nation.

Such a brilliant success, achieved and maintained by one man, is probably without precedent in the history of the stage. The managerial careers of Charles Kean and Macready were full of storm and stress—Mr. Irving steers his bark steadily over halcyon seas. Garrick, even in the days of monopoly, was only the centre of a circle of actors scarcely less distinguished

than himself. Mr. Irving has in his company but one artist whose attraction is at all comparable to his, while all others of equal distinction compete instead of co-operate with him. Reasoning from results, in fame, social consideration, and hard cash—for the fierce light that beats upon a managerial throne reveals also the secrets of the treasury—should we not conclude that this actor, whom an enlightened nation delights to honour as never actor was honoured before, must be one of the most incontestably great artists of all time?

But here comes in the anomaly. There has probably never been an actor of equal prominence whose talent, nay, whose mere competence, has been so much contested. He is the idol of a select circle of devotees, but even it is small, and its fervour is apt to be tempered with apology. The great public regards him with interest and respect rather

than with enthusiasm ; or if with enthusiasm, then it is for his success rather than his talent, since with the British public success is ever the strongest title to admiration. Towards some great actors men have felt the warmest personal gratitude, as though towards benefactors whom they had to thank for the profoundest emotions of their lives. These it would have required some courage to criticise, since, in some of their parts at least, general consent pronounced them ideally great. Towards Mr. Irving there is no such feeling among the thousands who flock to his theatre. In no single part has general consent pronounced him ideal ; in many it has emphatically pronounced him quite the reverse, though the Lyceum was none the less crowded on that account. In general society, one needs far more courage to praise than to condemn Mr. Irving. To admire him without reserve is held eccentric to the verge of affectation.

The orthodox dilate upon the splendour of the scenery, admire Miss Ellen Terry, and are reticent about Mr. Irving. Pressed for a decided opinion, they generally intimate that if, as Mrs. Poyser puts it, Mr. Irving could be "hatched over again and hatched different" he would be a very great actor. I believe this is a pretty fair statement of the attitude of mind of, say, four-fifths of an average Lyceum audience. On a first night the devotees of course muster largely, and enthusiasm is the order of the evening; but it is otherwise after a piece has run a week or so. This I can vouch from repeated personal observation. The crowded audiences at the Lyceum as a rule applaud but feebly, and the attendants in front of the house are not above contributing to the rapturous ovations. In some theatres, such as the Haymarket and the old Prince of Wales's, the mildness of the applause is explained by the prepon-

derance of stalls and dress-circle over unreserved places. As well expect thunder from a clear sky as applause from a theatre with no pit. But this does not account for the comparative silence of the Lyceum, where the pit and gallery bear a fair proportion to the rest of the house. The true explanation is that the great majority of the audience are intellectually interested, not emotionally excited. There is often as much applause when the curtain rises on an elaborate "set" as when it falls on a thrilling situation.

If four-fifths of the audience are of this tepid temperature, what of the remaining fraction? It is composed of the aforesaid ebullient devotees on the one hand, and of the frigid sceptics on the other. For there is undoubtedly a minority, small but not unimportant, who can see nothing but faults in Mr. Irving, who consider his popularity an extraordinary delusion, and who go to the Lyceum

as they would to a Chinese joss-house, curious to witness a set of superstitious rites incomprehensible to their intellect and remote from their sympathies. This attitude of mind is especially common among those who have not seen Mr. Irving often enough to become accustomed to him. The taste for his art must be acquired, and the mere commencement of the process is so irksome that they never get beyond the first sip, as it were, but make a wry face and refuse to repeat the dose. Familiarity with Mr. Irving's art, so far from lessening respect, may almost be called a necessary condition of the merest tolerance. If heretics can only be attracted often enough to the temple, they are almost sure to become—more or less—converted. Though they go to scoff, they will remain, not, perhaps, to pray, but at least to reflect and qualify their unbelief. But there are some unbelievers to whom the Lyceum is anathema, its mere mention sufficing to excite



a transport of iconoclastic fury. They are stiff-necked and very rebellious. Wild horses and country cousins shall scarcely drag them to the accursed place. The craving for "orders," that last infirmity of noble minds, moves them not when the Lyceum is in question. In their dread of sacrificing to idols, they obstinately close their eyes to the elements of truth and beauty contained in the cultus. One cannot go far in society without coming across a few such fanatics, for they are generally loud-voiced in proclaiming their convictions. And this, I repeat, is the great anomaly of Mr. Irving's position—that an actor whose powers have been and are attacked so sweepingly and defended with such qualifications, should have climbed to the high top-gallant of success, and fixed himself there so much more securely than any of his predecessors.

One part of the explanation, no doubt, is that his worshippers are active, his detractors more

or less passive, so that the great mass of the public is much more powerfully influenced by the former than by the latter. The voice of the Press, for instance, is, and has been for long, raised almost solely to swell the chorus of praise. The critics, from the very necessity of their position, have acquired that familiarity with Mr. Irving's manner, which I have indicated as a primary condition of appreciation. They have, in most cases quite genuinely and sincerely, acquired a taste for his art. They have obeyed the afore-mentioned inevitable tendency of dramatic criticism, and made him a law unto himself. Accepting him for what he certainly is, the most remarkable legitimate actor of their time, and finding impossible that wide induction from the achievements of the past which provides a standard in the other arts, they have formed from his own performances the rule by which to measure him. If they can understand more of what he says in

this part than in that, his elocution is perfect ; if he jerks a little less to-night than yesternight, he has acquired a station like the herald Mercury. They involuntarily translate what he does into what he intends to do, and give him credit for the will rather than the deed. I am myself a case in point. Shall I—dare I?—confess that there was a time when I was reckoned among the unbelievers, nay, when I was a very Saul of Tarsus, so far as bigotry went, in my opposition to the new creed? I clung to the Pharisaic prejudice, with which even such a liberal agnostic as Hamlet seems to have been infected, that ability to walk and talk was an indispensable condition of tolerable acting. I even tried my hand at stone-throwing in a small way, though I am happy to say my little lapidatory exercises broke no bones, far less contributed to a martyrdom. In this outer darkness I should probably have remained, but that by the grace of circumstances it became my busi-

ness to see and study Mr. Irving whether I liked it or not, and carefully to analyze my impressions. At first I did not like it at all, but little by little I found my nerves adjust themselves to the inevitable. My attention was no longer absorbed in making the phonetic changes necessary to transmute Mr. Irving's speech into English, or in wondering where his limbs were going to carry him next. I began to understand his language with tolerable ease, and his movements amused instead of afflicted me ; so that I could recognise the thoughtfulness, the ingenuity, the earnestness that shone through this unhappy veil of mannerism. I began to acknowledge that talent can produce great effects on the stage, even with imperfect command of its means. I understood that acting was an art whose higher flights might, under exceptional circumstances, be not unsuccessfully attempted without a mastery of its rudiments. Moreover, it is generally admitted, I believe,

and it certainly is my own impression, that Mr. Irving has of late years gained considerable control over his mannerisms, and effected a decided improvement in method. His Benedick is a very different performance in that respect from the terrible Macbeth whose image haunts me to this day. I went with a friend on the last night of the run, and I well remember how he and I, as the curtain fell, "looked at each other with a wild surmise, silent," and wondering whether we, or those of the audience who applauded such a performance, were labouring under a strange hallucination. It is with very different feelings that I now hear the applause at the Lyceum, even when I cannot very heartily join in it; and I believe that many others of Mr. Irving's critics have gone through similar phases of dislike and struggling respect, to end in what I hope I may call rational appreciation.

The Press sways the masses, and the masses

in turn sway the Press. The criticism which does not actually proceed from devotees by conviction, echoes the plaudits of the first night audiences. The critic is tired of enumerating the old faults and limitations, so leaves them out of sight and sets himself to discover merits by which to explain the indubitable success. In this word lies both the enigma and its key. Nothing succeeds like success, for success is its own advertisement. "Rumour, painted full of tongues," is its herald and harbinger, and there is in these days no more potent familiar-spirit. The Messrs. Willing, more than Faraday or Edison, deserve to be called the magicians of the nineteenth century ; but their "bold advertisement" is ineffectual compared with the subtle, penetrating, all-pervading influences which keep Mr. Irving in perpetual notoriety. He is of all living Englishmen the best advertised at the smallest relative cost. The Prince of Wales, Mr. Gladstone, Mrs. Langtry, Mr. Bradlaugh, are not more in

evidence. All the forces of art, literature and society are leagued to give him the puff direct, preliminary, collateral, collusive, and oblique. As I write these lines I am perpetrating a "puff oblique or by implication," and, from motives not wholly disinterested, I trust it may find unlimited currency. Even the scoffs and cavillings of the rabidest infidels, when they make themselves heard at all, merely serve the purpose of the puff collusive, which "acts in the disguise of determined hostility." Mr. Irving is no longer a celebrated actor, he is the actor-celebrity of the day. It was undoubtedly his talent as actor, manager, and diplomatist, so to speak, that gained him his vogue, but his vogue now reacts upon his talent and throws it into startling relief. A snowball once set fairly rolling under certain conditions of temperature, and on a declivity of a certain angle, will grow into an avalanche by its own impetus, absorbing and waxing fat upon the very obstructions in its path.

## V.

WE have hitherto been looking mainly at the reflection of Mr. Irving in the different facets of the social mirror. It is time now, that we should look at the man himself, or rather at the artist, who is thus variously imaged.

In so doing, I shall order my remarks according to an old-fashioned theory. I am inclined to hold opinion with critics of by-gone generations, that an actor's performance is more important than his intention, that he is to be judged by what he does on the stage rather than by what he thinks in the study, in short that the most marvellous powers of conception are of little use without an adequate faculty of



expression and presentation. Criticism has of late tended in the opposite direction, but in this respect I confess myself a reactionary. I shall accordingly begin with Mr. Irving's physical qualities, leaving till later the question of his mental endowments.

Let me in the first place lay down a principle in the words of an authority whose weight not even the most bigoted Irving-worshipper will question. They are as follows: "Acting, like every other art, has a mechanism. No painter, however great his imaginative power, can succeed in pure ignorance of the technicalities of his art; and no actor can make much progress till he has mastered a certain mechanism which is within the scope of patient intelligence. Beyond that is the sphere in which a magnetic personality exercises a power of sympathy which is irresistible and indefinable. That is great acting; but though it is inborn, and cannot be taught, it can be

brought forth only when the actor is master of the methods of his craft." The writer of this pregnant passage is Mr. Henry Irving, and no one is better fitted to stand both as an example the power of personality, and as a warning of against the neglect of technical mechanism. His "magnetic personality" is the germ from which his success has developed, the snow-ball which has grown into an avalanche. I have already alluded to the subtle effects of individuality in perturbing our judgment as to the absolute merit of a piece of art. The triumphs of a pretty woman are the commonest, but not the most enduring instances of this phenomenon. "The bride has paced into the hall, red as a rose is she,"—but it is the skinny hand and glittering eye of the Ancient Mariner that hold the wedding-guest in hour-long bondage. So is it with the British public; Mr. Irving holds them with his glittering eye. Some of them may be as restless and recalcitrant as

the wedding-guest of the legend, but ere long they too are lured, and the Mariner hath his will. He possesses in quite abnormal measure that "magnetic personality" whose power is "irresistible and indefinable." Not even the emptiest or most obstinate of wedding-guests can withstand it; he cannot choose but hear; and a sadder and a wiser man he wakes the morrow morn.

There have been many better stage-faces than Mr. Irving's, but few more remarkable. The high narrow forehead, the marked and overhanging but flexile eye-brows, the dark eyes which can be by turns so penetrating, so dreamy, so sinister, and so melancholy, the thin straight nose, the almost lipless sensitive mouth, the hollow cheeks and marvellously mobile jaw, combine to form an incomparable vehicle for the expression of a certain range of character and emotion. To me, I confess, the face under certain aspects seems absolutely beautiful, but

its beauty is <sup>ascetic</sup> ascetic, not sensuous—a beauty not of line and curve, but of flash and furrow. Mr. Irving can never transform himself into “l’homme sensuel moyen” of Mr. Matthew Arnold. Therefore it is that in such parts as Romeo and Claude Melnotte he is so painfully out of his element. Both these young men, though one of them is clothed in a splendid robe of poetry, are radically commonplace, and that is the one thing Mr. Irving can never be. Even for Benedick his face is too haggard. Benedick is an essentially eupeptic personage. His philosophy is founded on a faultless digestion. Now Mr. Irving’s features, however they may belie his actual temperament, are much more suggestive of dyspepsia. If he is determined to play the lover, let him hasten the promised dramatization of “The Bride of Lammermoor,” for he will look the last Laird of Ravenswood to the life. In “Romeo and Juliet” one could not but feel that he should by rights have cast him-

self, not for Romeo, but for the Apothecary. Apologists explain his apparent lack of judgment in attempting the character at all, by asserting of Romeo, what has long ago been said of Juliet, that the experience to play the part can never be attained until the age to look it is past. If this were so, which it is not, "Romeo and Juliet" might fairly be allowed to disappear from the stage, for a cadaverous Romeo is a monstrosity, a contradiction in terms, as who should say a feeble Hercules or a repulsive Cleopatra.

In Hamlet, if we agree to add ten years or so to the age probably intended by Shakespeare, the careworn melancholy of Mr. Irving's countenance is perfectly suited to the character—so also in Eugene Aram, in the Corsican Brothers, in Synorix. In Charles I. it not only suits the character, but is indispensable to it. Mr. Irving's portrait of the traditional gentleman-king is noble and beautiful. If it were only as true to history as it is to Vandyke, it would be perfect.

Its falsity is not Mr. Irving's fault but Mr. Wills', and lies not so much in any positive glory shed on Charles as in the blackening of Cromwell so as to make his antagonist stand out in bright relief. Had it not been for this gratuitous besmirching of the actual hero, we could have accepted with unmixed satisfaction Mr. Irving's picture of the legendary hero of popular imagination; just as we accept our traditional St. George without inquiring too curiously into the paladin's transactions on the Cappadocian pork-market, on which impertinent history throws such a dubious light. Whitewashing is at least inoffensive as compared with mud-throwing; and in this case Mr. Irving's is the former and the better part.

But it is in what are technically termed character parts that Mr. Irving's glittering eye and unique physiognomy do him yeoman's service. I do not here follow the established custom of distinguishing between his Shakesperean and

his melodramatic performances. A more useful distinction for my present purpose is between character parts and what may be called heroic parts, in default of a more exact term. The classes overlap, no doubt, in such a character as Charles I.; but in the main the distinction is clear enough. Othello is a heroic part, Iago a character part. Lesurques is a heroic part, Dubosc a character part. Hamlet and Romeo, Macbeth and Eugene Aram are heroic parts, Shylock and Richard III. are character parts quite as much as Mathias or Richelieu, Louis XI. or Digby Grant. It would be easy enough to frame a moderately exact definition of each category, but I think the distinction is so clear in the concrete that I need scarcely formulate it in abstract terms.

The range of emotion, then, which is usual in character parts, comes completely within the sphere of Mr. Irving's magnetic personality. Hatred, malignity and cunning dwell familiarly

in his eye, his jaw can express at will indomitable resolve or grotesque and abject terror. Grim humour lurks in his eyebrows, and cruel contempt in the corners of his mouth. No actor had ever fuller command of the expression which has been happily called "a lurid glance"—witness his Richard and his Louis. He can even reach the extreme of criminal degradation, as in Dubosc, of which a critic has justly said that it is so *unlike* the manly and clear-eyed Lesurques as to make it almost incredible that any one should ever confound the two. It is in the deeper emotions of this order, however, that Mr. Irving is most at home. When he strays into pure comedy, there is a monotony about his sardonic smile and the arch side-glances from under his never-resting eyebrows with which he emphasizes every point. He is comic indeed, but the comedy is never spontaneous, and it is hard to say how much of the effect may not be due to the mere contrast between his habitual gloom and these fitful



flashes of gaiety. This remark applies not only to his Jingle, Jeremy Diddler and Doricourt, but also to his Benedick. It is an amusing performance certainly, but in no sense exhilarating—for that it has too little animal spirits. When the melancholy Jacques laughed an hour sans intermission, his mirth was doubtless comic from its novelty, but it is hard to imagine it an infectious hilarity or the sort of laugh one grows fat upon.

Mr. Irving, in sum, has been lavishly endowed by nature with the constituent features of a magnetic personality. His physique, and especially his physiognomy, have been moulded in complete accordance with the demands of the time. For this age has added a fifth to the cardinal virtues, and has called it Intensity, of which attribute Mr. Irving might stand for an allegorical embodiment. The law of supply and demand holds, on the great scale, in the world of art. We wanted intensity and we have got it, making the fortune of the lucky man who

brought it into the market just at the right moment. This, in the ultimate analysis, is the secret of his success. His physical advantages are all summed up in the word intensity. I shall afterwards have occasion to return to this point ; meanwhile, let us glance at his physical disadvantages.

Magnetic personality, clearly, is not to be acquired, but there is a certain mechanism, says Mr. Irving, which is within the scope of patient intelligence. Training, in other words, is necessary even for genius. Mr. Irving holds that it should be self-training, and would have every actor self-educated in his craft. "There are some," he says, "who lament that there are now no schools for actors. This is a very idle lamentation. Every actor in full employment gets plenty of schooling, for the best schooling is practice, and there is no school so good as a well-conducted playhouse. The truth is, that the cardinal secrets of success in acting are

found within, while practice is the surest way of fertilizing these germs." If this be so, acting has clearly a great advantage over all other arts, in that its students, out of a mass of heterogeneous experience, can, by unguided instinct, refuse the evil and choose the good. Let us take the analogy suggested by Mr. Irving himself. Turn a young painter loose in a picture gallery to copy all that comes in his way, good, bad and indifferent. Let his sole guidance in the choice of models be the popularity of this picture or that with the chance visitors, who probably prefer Martin to Turner, Carlo Dolci to Perugino. Let him always have a crowd round his easel, applauding, hissing, or criticising every touch. Let him be from the very necessity of the case, painfully sensitive to these utterances of opinion, until he cannot draw a stroke without thinking of its immediate effect upon the onlookers, be they cobblers, clodhoppers, or Cook's ex-

cursionists. Let him have to find out for himself, by years of arduous labour, and even then imperfectly, methods, secrets, expedients, tricks if you will, which a master could have taught him perfectly in a few days. What will be the result of such a course of training? A great painter? Perhaps; but if so it will be in spite of his apprenticeship, not by reason of it. Yet this is precisely the training—not training at all, but a sort of licking and kicking into shape—gone through by an actor who is pitchforked on the provincial stage from a militia regiment or a merchant's office.\* As well argue that the best training for a violinist is to be given an instrument and told to find out as best he can how to play on it. An actor's instrument is his own body—his limbs, his

\* It more often happens nowadays that a young actor is placed in a travelling "combination" and sent round the country to play one part every night for a year—an even worse form of "training."

features, his voice. In it, as in a violin, lurk infinite possibilities of harmony—and of discord. He may, indeed, with the aid of a delicate ear and taste, learn by experience to avoid the discords, but even then he will never be able to develop with complete mastery all the capabilities of his instrument. On the other hand, though no teacher can make of him a Paganini unless he has the inborn genius, yet even for the greatest genius teachers can, nay must, smooth the way to perfection. Is it not a wild paradox to hold that systematic instruction is required for the German flute, but that one can learn by haphazard experiment and indiscriminate imitation to play upon that most delicate of instruments, the human body? The mistake is very like that of Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, into which Mr. Irving of all people should be the last to fall. He and those who think with him on this point seem to hold that—

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“ Semblable aux gais marquis par Molière décrits,  
Le grand acteur sait tout sans avoir rien appris.”

To which heresy Samson retorts a few lines further down—

“ Que le génie enfin n'ait que lui seul pour maître  
Et, les règles à bas, les chefs-d'œuvre vont naître.  
—Où nous ont-ils conduits, ces discoureurs subtils?  
Les règles ne sont plus : les chefs-d'œuvre où sont-ils ?”

Mr. Irving's theory is founded on his own experience. He is self-taught : he is successful : therefore let genius be its own master. The fallacy is very natural. If he had gone through the most perfect of conservatoires he could not have been more successful ; but it does not follow that he would have been less so, and he would certainly have been a better actor.

For the functions of training are twofold : on the one hand to develop, on the other to repress, the individuality. Neither of these functions can be properly performed without

external guidance, and least of all the second. The actor stands too near himself; he cannot see himself as others see him; and with all his "patient intelligence" he falls into mannerism.

It is idle to argue that all actors have mannerisms. All remarkable actors have a manner, but that is a totally different thing. Mannerisms, I take it, are exaggerated habits, almost or quite beyond the actor's control, which obtrude themselves without rhyme or reason in all he does. Now there have been many great actors with no such indurated peculiarities, forcing themselves upon us like blemishes in the complexion. Besides, there are mannerisms and mannerisms—and Mr. Irving's are of the worst. In writing of them it is difficult to avoid an appearance of flippant caricature, and yet caricature is in reality impossible. Its essence lies in comic exaggeration, and not one of his hundred mimics has succeeded in exaggerating Mr. Irving at his worst,

What is the first lesson an actor, self-taught or otherwise, should learn? To stand still on the stage. The second? To move with grace, and even where grace is not required by his part, to show that he has perfect command of his limbs. The third? To speak his mother-tongue with purity, or if that may not be, at least so that it shall be understood. The fourth? To manage his voice so that it may be sonorous, not stentorian, in the lower register, and clear, not strident, in the upper; so that it may produce the maximum of effect in the auditorium with the minimum of effort to the lungs and throat. Not one of these elementary lessons has Mr. Irving taught himself. His patient intelligence has, indeed, "mastered a certain mechanism," but it is a mechanism in which the wheels are complicated, the action irregular, and the friction immense. To vary a former illustration, he has set about building an organ for himself, without studying either



the laws of acoustics or the instructions of experienced organ-builders. The result is a cumbrous instrument, from which he brings forth music, strangely attractive indeed, but broken and fitful, the keys creaking painfully every now and then, and the pipes wheezing ludicrously.

'Tis pity ! There is no reason in the nature of things why Mr. Irving should not have been an eminently graceful actor. Even now, when he is at rest, his poses are often full of elegance. But he never will be at rest. His feverish anxiety to fill up with "business" every moment he is on the stage, is sometimes attributed to a conscious desire to make himself, at all hazards, the observed of all observers, even when the action of the play demands that he should be in the background. I think too highly of Mr. Irving's artistic sense to accept this explanation. I believe that the fault arises from a positive inability to be still. This was the great flaw in

his admirable Iago, in which his other mannerisms were remarkably toned down. It was one of the many blemishes of his Romeo, or rather it contributed to the Egyptian darkness of that performance, in which one or two striking beauties shone out "like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear." It goes a great way to mar his Lesurques, in whose earlier scenes perfect calm and repose are required to accentuate the contrast in the second act. Mr. Irving makes him nervously restless from his very first entrance. His mere manner of eating soup suggests a conscience burdened with some ghastly crime, contemplated or committed. Not otherwise must Orestes have lunched, with the Furies for waitresses. There could not be a better illustration of a mannerism as I have defined it—an invincible habit obtruding itself to the detriment of the required effect.

So much of his minor movements—what, now shall I say of his walk? How describe it? How

account for it? It is as difficult to describe as it is easy to imitate. The idea it suggests is that every now and then Mr. Irving, like the marionette Napoleon described by Dickens, loses command of his legs, and becomes their unwilling slave, because, as Mr. Gilbert's similarly-afflicted hero remarks, "they are two to one, which is a strong working majority." But even this hypothesis would not account for the depression of the head and protrusion of the shoulders which accompany any rapid motion, like a survival from the low stage of development exemplified by many savage races, in which butting with the skull is an habitual practice. It seems as though locomotion with Mr. Irving were not a result of volition, but of an involuntary spasm. Under certain circumstances it is complicated by the most extraordinary sidelong and backward skirmishings, reminding one of the movements of a napkin-ring when suddenly shot out from under the forefinger. That mind of man should con-

ceive or muscles of man should execute such complex evolutions is a standing wonder. And there is no assignable reason for the phenomenon. Mr. Irving's head is excellently set on his shoulders, and his motions can be, and often are, those of a normal human being. The secret probably lies in the power of unchecked habit—in the lack of early training to counteract the effects of long runs in "mannered" characters.

This defect of motion is of course less noticeable in some parts than in others. As a general rule, it mars our enjoyment less in character parts than in heroic parts. Shylock may stump and hobble, but Hamlet's port should be erect and free. In Richelieu, in Louis XI., in Richard III., even in such a part as the drunken and swaggering Dubosc, Mr. Irving's mannerism might seem absolutely to help the character. Yet even here its effect is not artistic, since every now and then we receive the

impression that he is not entirely master of his movements, than which there is nothing more fatal to our enjoyment. This impression may be partly due to our recollection of him in heroic characters, in which it has positively haunted us; but whatever its source, it is injurious to the illusion. It may be accepted as a rule with few exceptions, that any *involuntary* defect in physical grace and ease on the part of an actor, even where it seems to heighten the realism of the character, tends to shock rather than to please a cultivated audience. I, for my part, should not care to see a Falstaff who, like Stephen Kemble, required no stuffing, or an Othello who, like Ira Aldridge, held his shadowed livery of the burnished sun direct from nature. It would be merely painful to have a veritable hunchback play Richard III. or Triboulet. We do not even like to see the feebleness of age represented by an actor who is in reality aged and feeble. We like to

4 conceive the particular character as literally a *persona*, a mask, behind which stands the actor, a normal and fully-developed human being, master of each nerve and muscle, and using them all with deliberate calculation to produce the desired effect. We resent the intrusion of scraps of crude nature, and especially of abnormal nature, into the work of art. Therefore it is that mannerisms, once recognised as such, are always inartistic, even where they happen for the moment to contribute to the required effect. If the player can "force his soul so to his own conceit" as to have real salt tears in his eyes, we admire his power of identifying himself with the character; but our feeling is very different if we know that they proceed, not from sensibility, but from a chronic cold in the head.

One does not know whether to speak with smiles or tears of the third of Mr. Irving's mannerisms—the murder of our mother-tongue.

This is the hardest sin to forgive, partly because an offence to the ear is more irritating and importunate than an offence to the eye, which at worst can always protect itself; partly, too, because it, more than the others, savours of affectation. Every one who has seen much of Mr. Irving knows that he can on occasion speak with perfect purity; but every one knows, too, how seldom these lucid intervals occur. In a certain character, or on a certain night, he will be a very fountain of English undefiled, with only an occasional little spirt of turbid Irvingese. On the next evening, or in the next character, some spirit, not an angel, seems to have descended and troubled the waters. Not a vowel but has undergone a change into something new and strange, not a consonant but is jerked out with a convulsion of the throat or a spasm of the under jaw, while every dental at the end of a word is prolonged into an unmistakable sneeze. This subject is inseparably bound up with the

defective management of the voice, a discussion of which, even were it in my power, would be too technical and tedious. Trained elocutionists have assured me that, considering Mr. Irving's ignorance of the art, the effects he produces are marvellous, though they of course entail upon him a disproportionate amount of exertion. Be this as it may, the sense of labour and friction in his delivery, the slow pumping up of each little phrase, adds to the painful effect of his enormities in pronunciation. How often in any average performance do lines occur which might be Choctaw, or pentameters with a Zulu click in each accent, for all that the majority of the audience understands of them! Even in this respect there has been an improvement of late.\* When he does plunge into the depths he goes as deep as ever, but as a rule he keeps to

\* On the first night of the recent revival of "Hamlet" (July 11th, 1883) Mr. Irving, practising, perhaps, so as to be understood of the people in America, pronounced



the surface of moderate intelligibility. This is a small mercy, but we may as well be thankful for it. A fatal proclivity to speaking in unknown tongues seems to be connected with the very name of Irving.

All this, I am aware, is mere commonplace. Mr. Irving's mannerisms are a proverb and a by-word, and there would be no need to dwell on them were it not that some people have become so accustomed to them as either to forget their existence or proclaim them as virtues. Hazlitt, with all his enthusiasm for Edmund Kean, complained that "if you had not been to see the little man twenty times in Richard, and did not deny his being hoarse in the last act, or admire with a purity which I have not noticed in his utterance since a very early stage of his career. Almost the only flagrant defect was in the phrase, "By heaven, I'll mek a gôst of him that lats me!"—an old stumbling-block. For the rest, I was sorry to note a tendency to emphasize the hysterical phase of Hamlet's character, always prominent enough in Mr. Irving's conception.

him for being so, you were looked on as a lukewarm devotee or half an infidel." There is a similar tendency among the devotees of the Lyceum either to deny that Mr. Irving sprawls in his walk and drawls in his talk, or to admire him for doing so. The inner brotherhood has formed its conception of graceful locomotion and classical English upon the examples afforded by Mr. Irving. It has made him, even in this respect, a law unto himself, and is prepared to maintain that where his practice offends against the ordinary canons of deportment and pronunciation, he is right and the canons are wrong. Few, perhaps, would explicitly make this assertion, but many will implicitly commit themselves to something very like it. This is foolish and unnecessary. Mr. Irving has merits numerous and genuine enough to justify the warmest admiration. We need not go out of our way to find in his defects fresh fuel for our enthusiasm.

At the same time I believe that Mr. Irving's

mannerisms, even the worst, have increased rather than diminished his success. They heighten his individuality, if not its magnetism. They are, indeed, the over-development of his individuality, the defects of his qualities. Picturesqueness is the quality, grotesqueness the defect, and both alike secure for him the concentrated attention of his audiences. Knowing very certainly that his performances are remarkable, they trouble themselves the less as to whether they are good or bad. He stands out from all the actors of the day, on his own stage or any other, quite as much by reason of his faults as of his virtues. Mr. E. R. Russell has very truly remarked that the moment he walks down the stage on his first entrance in Hamlet, it needs no special stage-arrangement, no "reception," no reference to the play-bill, to assure even the least initiated spectator that he is the most remarkable man on the stage. Had Tom Jones taken Partridge to the Lyceum, he

would never have thought of undervaluing Hamlet to the King.

To conclude this somewhat long consideration of physical merits and defects, let me quote a passage from a pamphlet entitled, "Irving as Hamlet," by the intelligent critic whose name I have just mentioned. "In moments of high excitement," says Mr. Russell, "Irving rapidly plods across the stage with a 'gait peculiar to him, a walk somewhat resembling that of a fretful man trying to get very quickly over a ploughed field. In certain passages his voice has a querulous piping impatience which cannot be reconciled with stage elegance. But there is no reason why Hamlet should not have had these peculiarities; and if we are to see him really living in the midst of what has come upon him, the genius of the actor who accomplishes this all-important feat as only genius can, will be distinctly helped by any little inef-faceable peculiarities which, while not incon-

sistent with the character, give the representation a stamp of personal individuality. This, though a minor characteristic, has greatly distinguished Irving's acting in all his noted parts, although the merit has not been much recognised in the surface criticism of the day. . . . Even in his Hamlet there is a strongly-marked and courageously preserved individuality which is more helpful to the due effect of the play than any amount of insipid personal beauty and grace." After this, shall I be accused of exaggerating the danger that Mr. Irving's defects may be mistaken for qualities, to the lasting detriment of sound acting in England? How, I would ask, can the "ineffaceable peculiarities" of an actor be said to give individuality to one character, when they are necessarily the same in all the other characters he plays? They give individuality to the actor himself—I have just been insisting on their potency in this respect—and may appear to give indi-

viduality to the first character in which we happen to see him ; but in all others they mar the individuality, making Hamlet, Eugene Aram, Claude Melnotte, Romeo, and Benedick mere phases of Irving, and nothing but Irving. There is indeed "no reason why Hamlet should not have had these peculiarities," except that Ophelia calls him "the glass of fashion and the mould of form," which even she could scarcely have said had he habitually moved as if plodding rapidly over a ploughed field. In the same way there is no absolute reason why he should not have had a squint or a wooden leg. Either of these peculiarities would "give the representation a stamp of personal individuality," in Mr. Russell's sense of the term, and neither is positively "inconsistent with the character." We may even go further, and find a peculiarity which is positively consistent with the character. It is highly probable, for example, that Hamlet stammered. Considering his notorious indecision

of character and the recorded fact that he was scant of breath, we can scarcely avoid the conclusion that he must have stuttered horribly. The theory, at any rate, has quite as much evidence in its favour as many received conjectures of the commentators. If any of our rising tragedians would like to give the character this "stamp of personal individuality" I am prepared to support him with a whole essay demonstrating that if Hamlet did not stammer he should have done so; and I think I can promise him that "the merit" will not fail to be recognised even in "the surface criticism of the day." But if he stammers in all his other parts as well, the effect will be lost. The cross which the robber chief put upon Ali Baba's door gave it individuality; but when Morgiana made a similar mark on all the other doors in the street, the individuality vanished in mannerism. The way to give any door distinction would then have been to rub out the cross;

and similarly if Mr. Irving now wishes to individualize any one of his parts, he should carefully refrain from plodding across ploughed fields in it.



## VI.

**A**N actor's physical and intellectual qualities so merge into each other that it is impossible to draw a hard and fast line between them. The peculiarity to which I am about to allude is one of nerve and muscle quite as much as of mind, but is primarily due, I think, to mental causes.

Mr. Irving is singularly deficient in purely mimetic power. How far the deficiency may extend I cannot tell, but the faculty certainly plays a very minute part in his public performances. Each of his characters is a fresh development of his own individuality, not, as is the case with mimetic actors, a study from the life, or a generalization of many studies from the life. He creates rather than imitates. His greatest triumphs are projections of himself, not reflections

of the world around him. This characteristic combines with his mannerisms to impart a certain sameness to his style, but it is by no means one of his mannerisms, nor even an analogous defect in his art.

Indeed it is scarcely a positive defect at all, but rather the absence of a quality which, in most of his parts, is not strictly necessary. This mimetic gift has always been included in the powers of the very greatest actors, but many of the truly great have been quite without it, while, on the other hand, it is often highly developed in men of otherwise mediocre talent. It is much more needed in comedy than in tragedy, though there is even a certain class of comedy in which it is not essential. Garrick, if testimony goes for anything, was a marvel of mimetic power. Every one knows the story\* of his performance in

\* I give the story as Samson tells it in "*L'Art Théâtral*." It appears with different details in the biographies of Garrick, but the effect is the same.

dumb show before a theatrical supper-party in Paris. He impersonated, among other characters, a mother with her child awaiting the return of her husband. He made no change in his dress, and merely used a handkerchief to represent the child; yet by pure facial expression and gesture he carried his audience through a whole series of emotions, until at last he depicted so vividly the mother's anguish when her child slipped from her arms at the open window, that the ladies of the company could bear it no longer, and shrieked to him to stop. Not less characteristic is the anecdote of his sending a negro-boy almost into convulsions by impersonating a turkey-cock; and it is only one of twenty similar instances on record. Now such achievements are entirely foreign to Mr. Irving's artistic nature. He would make a very masculine mother, and a strangely sardonic turkey-cock. The effects within his sphere differ from these, not in degree, but in kind.

He may move and appal an audience as much as Garrick, but, if so, it is not by assuming a foreign personality, but by developing and accentuating one side of his own. Garrick had no more physical likeness to a turkey-cock than Mr. Irving, but he had the instinct of minute observation, and the delicate plasticity of muscle, which constitute the mime in the narrowest sense of the word. Kemble, again, and Macready seem to have been, like Mr. Irving, actors of small mimetic faculty ; and instances could be multiplied to prove that it is by no means necessary for the attainment of great eminence in heroic, and in a certain class of character, parts. The effect of its absence is to restrict the actor's range, and to render him more apt to fall into mannerism, which is simply a result of lack of pliancy.

And now we have to notice a more important limitation of Mr. Irving's power, connected with, though not dependent on, the one we

have just been considering, and like it an effect of physical and mental causes combined. Mr. Irving is, of all distinguished actors, the least inspired. He never carries us away on the wings of his passion or his pathos, to set us down again after a little, wondering through what regions of terror or of beauty we have in the meantime been wafted. He never brings us face to face with the very soul of pure humanity in some scene, or it may be some mere accent or gesture, which passes instantly into the very fibre of our being, like a vivid, unforgettable, almost epoch-making personal experience. It is not unequal and fitful actors alone who have these flashes of inspiration. The whole performance may be admirable and delightful: we may listen to it with the greatest pleasure throughout: but here or there, perhaps in some quite unimportant scene where we least expect it, we shall feel our inmost soul thrilled with an accent of living truth,

above convention, beyond the reach of cleverness, standing out like Lionardo's angel on the canvas of Verrocchio, luminous and divine. Every one, surely, can remember such experiences, coming unannounced and unforeseen, "as when some great thought strikes along the brain and flushes all the cheek." They are, no doubt, partly subjective, dependent, that is, upon some chance predisposition in the individual to receive the thrilling impression. But though the mood of the moment may render one more or less susceptible at different times, the absolute non-occurrence of such ecstatic moments, for so they may be called, in one's whole experience of a particular actor, can scarcely be due to mere chance. For my own part, I can remember to have been thus lifted out of myself by Salvini and Jefferson, by Sarah Bernhardt and De-launay, often by Mrs. Kendal, once or twice by Edwin Booth, but never, absolutely never,

by Mr. Irving. I am not, however, stating a mere personal impression ; I speak from a close study of Mr. Irving's audiences. Nor do I judge merely by the comparative mildness of the applause. Such flashes as I speak of are not generally followed by thunder, but rather by an electric thrill. It is this thrill of sympathy, fusing the whole audience into one man, and that man all eye and heart, which is conspicuously absent from the Lyceum.

“ No holy rage or frantic fires do stir  
Or flash about the spacious theatre.”

Even the enthusiasm of a first night is directed to Mr. Irving the manager, the conceiving and informing spirit of a brilliant entertainment, quite as much as to Mr. Irving the actor. The test of this is that the applause is often greater on his entrance, before he has opened his mouth, than after the crucial scene of the play. In all parts Mr. Irving interests his audiences ; in his better

parts he moves them ; but he leaves them always conscious of the motive mechanism. He grasps them, but they are not rapt away. If there be any emotion which he has entirely at his command, so as to produce in his audience the physical thrill of which I speak, it is terror. In the softer and nobler emotions he always falls short, if only by a hair's-breadth, of absolutely convincing nature. It would be easy to make a list of important scenes in which he produces a considerable effect indeed, but leaves undeveloped their finest possibilities. I do not speak of his *Othello*, full though it be of such lost opportunities, for that is not one of his better parts. *Lesurques*, *Eugene Aram*, and *Charles I.* afford fairer examples. The scene, for instance, which closes the second act of "*The Lyons Mail*"—the scene in which the father, after urging his son to suicide, attributes his refusal to physical cowardice—is one of those passages in which the audience might



be made to "rise at" a great actor in a storm and whirlwind of emotion. Mr. Irving is good throughout, fine at one point, but great, never. The point I refer to is his retort to his father's assertion that he saw him commit the murder :—"God sees us both, and knows it is a lie!" He introduces three pauses instead of one in this line, speaking it thus :—"God—sees us both—and knows—it is a lie!" seeming to pump up each phrase with a separate stroke of the piston. Yet his gesture and attitude, and the far-off expression of his eyes, are so well imagined as to produce a deep effect. Otherwise the scene is clever and no more ; well thought out and well executed, but unconvincing. Very different is the great scene of the third act, in which Dubosc in his garret gloats over the preparations for Lesurques' execution. Here the appeal is to the intellect and not the heart of the audience. The face must express brutal degradation, the limbs grotesque recklessness,

and that is all. It can be done with different degrees of finesse and inventive fertility, and of both Mr. Irving commands the very highest degree. The scene is a masterpiece, because there is in it no appeal to our higher emotions. Wherever such an appeal is demanded, Mr. Irving indicates rather than attains the highest possibilities. He does not lack skill, he may not even fail in truth: there is only one word for what we miss, and that is inspiration.

Pathos then is not entirely within Mr. Irving's range. His voice, for one thing, has not the flexible variety, the vibrating tenderness, the subtly penetrating quality, to which, as to music our inmost fibres respond. There is, indeed, a mute pathos in his eyes which is effective in such parts as Charles I. and Lesurques. In each of these characters, too, he succeeds so entirely in portraying a courteous and high-minded gentleman, that the misfortunes which befall them move us, so to speak, of their own accord. But when

the moments of highest emotion arrive, he does little to accentuate the effect. Such a scene as the last act of Charles I. may be said in the most literal sense of the words to "play itself." Mr. Irving speaks the lines very intelligently and very monotonously. He looks the part to perfection, and there is pathos in that very look, with the associations it calls up. Our sympathy with this sad and brave gentleman has been awakened long ago. It is maintained and perhaps heightened in this scene, but if heightened it is by the situation and not by the actor. The distinction may seem a fine one, but will be understood at once by any one who will note at what a dead level our emotion remains throughout the scene. I am myself peculiarly sensitive to such heroism as Charles shows in his last moments. From his entrance onwards, I have "a lump in my throat ; " but it grows no larger as the scene progresses. There is no gradation, no climax. One feels that some accent of living

truth, some touch of palpitating nature, is wanting. An inspired actor could not but have known how to place "a sorrow's crown of sorrow" upon such a scene.

We have next to consider Mr. Irving's intellectual qualities, pure and simple. Here we are in his stronghold. It is his face and his brain that have made him what he is—his glittering eye and his restless, inventive intellect. Richard Wagner, adapting a Teutonic legend to suit himself, says that the most precious gift which the Norns gave him in his cradle was "den nie zufried'nen Geist der stets auf Neues sinnt." The same might be said of Mr. Irving—he is a restlessly innovating spirit. His intellect is strictly that of the executive artist—eager, earnest, rapid and instinctive, rather than logical or profound. When he deals in abstract thought and argument—in his famous Edinburgh address, for instance—his reasoning is often of the weakest ; it is in com-

prehension and illustration of other men's thoughts that he is strong. His place is certainly not the platform, but the stage. His intellect is not that of a thinker, but of an actor.

Edmund Kean read Shakespeare by flashes of lightning : Mr. Irving reads him by the student's midnight oil. He is great in new glosses and daring in conjectural emendations. The stalls are startled by his critical acumen, the boxes thrilled by his archæological scholarship. He throws succulent bones of contention to the critics, which they learnedly discuss to their own infinite satisfaction and his no small advantage. He takes counsel with the commentators more than with the Muses.

Let me not be thought to sneer at Mr. Irving's intelligence. To do so would be at once foolish and ungrateful. It is no small thing on the English stage that an actor should study his part syllable by syllable, comma by comma, and should seek to place it in its true relation to the

rest of the play, rather than to hang on it, as on a fishing-line, the greatest number of hooks baited for the applause of the groundlings. We feel that Mr. Irving understands every line he utters—would that the audience always understood it as well!—and has his reasons, which we may or may not approve, but which are always interesting, for interpreting and emphasizing it as he does. I cannot myself see that Mr. Irving's peculiar merit as a Shakespearean actor lies in novelty of general conception. Each character certainly comes from his hands something quite different from what his predecessors have accustomed us to ; but this arises, I think, more from his marked individuality and the minute attention to detail involved in his method, than from any great originality in conceiving the groundwork of the character. Any one who knows Mr. Irving's manner, the effects he seeks and those he avoids, may form a pretty fair preconception of what he is likely to make of a new Shake-

sperean part. The doubtful element, on which its relative success will depend, lies in the ingenuity and happiness of his elaboration of details. It is by thus breaking up the character, so to speak, into numerous small points of interest, that he distracts attention from his comparative inability to produce great and sweeping emotional effects. He is an artist in mosaic rather than in fresco, a skilled goldsmith rather than a great sculptor; but better clever intarsia than stupid high-art, a silver statuette by Cellini rather than a marble colossus by Bandinelli.

In proportion as a character calls for intellect rather than purely histrionic qualities in its interpreter—in proportion as it addresses itself to the intellect rather than the sympathy of the audience—in precisely the same proportion does Mr. Irving succeed in it. His Hamlet is better than his Macbeth or Othello, his Shylock than his Hamlet, his Richard than his Shylock; while his Iago, who speaks direct

from brain to brain, comes as near perfection as anything he has done. By intellect Mr. Irving enters "into the skin" of Charles I. and Richelieu. By intellect he makes Dubosc a living type, Mathias a haunting recollection. By intellect he produces the effect of masterful decision of purpose, which saves even his worst parts from the fatal reproach of feebleness. By intellect he makes us forget his negative failings and forgive his positive faults. By intellect, he forces us to respect where we cannot admire him. By intellect he dominates the stage.

Let us now turn our attention from the actor to the theatre which he has created by intellect and by intellect upholds.



## VII.

**T**HAT a snowball, to revert to an old figure, may grow into an avalanche, certain conditions of temperature are required. All these conditions the social atmosphere of England has presented during the whole course of Mr. Irving's career. As a manager, not less than as an actor, he has had all external circumstances in his favour.

There are times when old words rapidly yet imperceptibly acquire a new meaning, a widened connotation, in the popular mind. Ideas grow while the terms expressing them remain unchanged, and the use of the old word is apt to blind us to the novelty of the thing it signifies. The word *Art*, as now used by an intelligent Englishman, is a case in point. The idea it

suggests to us to-day, was foreign to the thoughts of the majority even of educated men fifty, thirty, aye twenty years ago. Art has now a capital A in the popular conception. Our fathers thought of the arts as elegant accomplishments which were strictly "extras" in the school of life: we regard Art as an essential part of the curriculum. To them it was a more or less irrelevant decoration for the outside of the cup and platter. We seek to make of it the sapid and stimulating element of our daily food.

We awoke one morning to find ourselves an artistic people. The plastic and decorative arts seemed to have found a new renaissance in our midst. We were great in the execution, if not in the creation, of music. But one niche in the temple, one grade in the hierarchy, remained unfilled—we had no worthy theatre. It was a "hiatus valde deflendus," which must at all costs be filled up. We offered a princely reward

to whosoever should supply us with a drama, alive or dead. Mr. Irving was at once on the spot. To give us a living drama was not within his power ; but he came to the rescue with what we were really much better prepared for,—a dead drama skilfully galvanized. Our nerves were not yet strong enough to bear modern ideas in modern speech upon the stage. Other managers provided us with modern lack-of-ideas, and they, too, were not without their reward. But we really demanded a certain amount of gentle intellectual exercise without excitement ; and this we found in Shakespeare at the Lyceum. Nor in Shakespeare alone—even over the merest melodrama was thrown a subtle glamour of “ psychology ” which gave it artistic tone. Thus Mr. Irving’s theatre has become one of the established wayside shrines on the paths of culture, at which the devout dilettante never fails to make his orisons—and dilettantism has permeated society much more deeply than some may suppose.

Mr. Irving, as a manager, has known how to adapt himself to every art tendency of the day. Foremost among these is a craving for what may be called technical realism of detail, which manifests itself in the popularity of such art as that of Mr. Alma Tadema. Mr. Ruskin, I think, has said of painters of this school that the less important an object is to the picture the greater will be their success in painting it. This is in many cases a cruel half-truth, but as applied to a production at the Lyceum, it is often entirely accurate. Mr. Irving has the art of inspiring to the verge of genius his scenic artists and machinists, which may possibly be the reason why he has so little inspiration left over for himself. As one thinks of the past five years at the Lyceum there rises to the mind's eye a whole gallery of scenic pictures, each as worthy of minute study as any canvas of the most learned archæological painter. To take only two instances, I venture to say

that scenic art at home or abroad has done nothing more perfect than the Temple in "The Cup," and the Cathedral in "Much Ado." They have been surpassed in mere splendour, but never in minute artistic realism. It seems as if the art of the stage-architect could no further go. Moreover, the intellect of South Kensington is taxed, its material resources ransacked, to provide historically accurate and æsthetically beautiful costumes and accessories. No previous manager could have produced such effects, for the time was not yet come. The Lyceum drama came into existence along with—I had almost said for the sake of—the new art hues and fabrics.

But dresses and scenery alone do not make even a tableau, still less a moving dramatic picture. To this end is needed an artist's faculty of invention and a general's power of organization. Mr. Irving possesses both, and may fairly be called a great stage-manager.

His methods in this branch of his art are the same as in the presentation of character ; they are summed up in the words : patient, intelligent elaboration. He works over every inch of his canvas, leaves no corner without its little illustrative or merely decorative touch. Every motion, every grouping of even the most subordinate personages, shall have its significance. The smallest hint in the text is made the germ of some picturesque conceit, and if the text affords no hint, why, Mr. Irving's brain is fertile to the point of spontaneous generation. Mercutio's wound is not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door, and 'twill not serve unless he have a well and a church-door on the stage to emphasize his comparisons. Here Shakespeare's hint is utilized to produce an effect of pleasant surprise, like that of an ingenious rhyme in poetry. After the elopement of Jessica, again, the curtain rises for a moment to show Shylock marching grimly homewards to his

rified lair, undreaming of his loss. In this idea Shakespeare has no part, but it is none the less admirable. Mr. Irving's genius as a "regisseur" is of a kind to appeal to all sections of his public. While the unskilful, like Mrs. Carlyle's servant, cry, "How expensive!" the judicious murmur, "How ingenious!"

Burbage and Betterton, relying upon pure convention for their surroundings, bore the whole weight of the drama upon their own shoulders. To Garrick fell the still more difficult task of struggling with half—or quarter—realism. Mr. Irving, with all the resources of absolute scenic illusion at his disposal, wisely shifts upon his accessories more than half the burden. An audience has but a limited amount of attention at command, and if that be kept occupied without strain and without break, it asks no more. It has received a certain sum of entertainment, and does not examine too curiously as to how much was due to the drama and how much to its trappings.

I have yet to allude to Mr. Irving's masterstroke as a manager—the creation of a tragedienne in Miss Ellen Terry. The British public has accepted her with acclamation in that character, thus justifying Mr. Irving's choice, which is all I am here concerned with. To those who, in tragic parts, demand more than graceful attitudes and a sing-song recitation, it must seem a pity that this most charming of all our actresses of comedy should have been translated into a sphere in which she is so far from at home. Even at the Lyceum she has not been without chances of showing her true gifts. How exquisite is her Lætitia Hardy, her Iolanthe (in Mr. Wills' play), her Ruth in "Eugene Aram," even her Desdemona! As for her Ophelia, her Pauline, her Juliet, even her Portia and her Beatrice, "*non ragioniam di lor.*" The public and the critics are pleased with them, and to give the reasons for my dissent would lead me far from my subject, which is not Miss Terry, but is Mr. Irving. Suffice it to note



his penetration in discerning in Miss Terry the almost necessary complement to his own talent. Whatever her absolute merits in a part, she always harmonizes as perhaps she alone could with the whole tone of the picture. She gives their crowning charm to the fabrics of South Kensington. She has all the outward and visible signs of the inward and spiritual grace which covers a multitude of histrionic sins—I mean, of course, Intensity.

For the rest, in the selection and management of his company, Mr. Irving has the art of making a little go a long way. Such excellent artists as Mrs. Sterling, Mr. David James, and Mr. Forbes Robertson lend their aid to special productions, but for the most part the general performances are characterized by a golden mediocrity. The public demands no more; and even apart from economic considerations, it would be difficult to secure anything better on the English stage, where each actor has

his place on a graduated scale of parts, below which no consideration of general effect will tempt him to descend.

## VIII.

IT is not for me to enlarge on Mr. Irving's high personal character, his generosity, his amiability, his courtesy. Though these qualities have contributed largely to a success, which has been social almost as much as artistic, they do not come within the scope of a critical study. In these, as in all his other merits and most of his defects, nature seems to have foreseen the circumstances in which he would be placed, and to have provided him with all that could be helpful to him. There are some men to whom the gifts of even the most malignant fairies are in course of time transmuted into blessings. They seem to have bribed the constellations at their birth, to have "corrected fortune" in cutting of the cards of life, to have clogged the dice in their game with fate.

For ten years before Mr. Irving's rise to the surface, the serious drama had been entirely stagnant. He had no vivid memories of a great predecessor to contend with, much less any living rival. Causes quite independent of him were drawing men's minds to the theatre. Pietistic scruples were vanishing, men of culture were beginning to deplore the degradation of the acted drama. They came, they saw, he conquered. Crowds flocked to his theatre who had either never been to a theatre before or had long lost the habit of playgoing. Consequently they were uncritical on the technical points in which lay Mr. Irving's weakness, while they were peculiarly susceptible to the intellectual stimulation and composite artistic pleasure in which lay the strength of the Lyceum productions. Almost simultaneously there arose a revived interest in Shakespeare, the foundation of the New Shakespeare Society being one of its symptoms. To the dilettant-

ism thus begotten and fostered, Mr. Irving's minute attention to details of textual criticism and archæological illustration was peculiarly grateful. The idea that Shakespeare is more for the study than the stage, so bitterly denounced by Mr. Irving himself, began rapidly to lose ground. He was found to be vastly more entertaining than any one had imagined, and it was even conceived that new light was cast, not only upon detached passages in his text, but on his poetic intentions as a whole. And this was no doubt true in some cases, though such performances as Mr. Irving's Romeo, Miss Terry's Juliet, Mr. Terriss's Mercutio, Mr. Forrester's Antonio, and Mr. Cooper's Gratiano probably illustrated what he did *not* intend rather than what he did. The tendencies of the plastic arts conspired with those of literature and society to secure Mr. Irving's triumph. With new methods and materials for artistic decoration arose a new interest in their application. The

higher painting of the day did much to accustom the popular mind to the very ideal of physical beauty which Mr. Irving and Miss Terry were best able to present. "The stress of modern life," says Mr. Wedmore, "is so much incompatible with the ideal of repose and of faultlessness, that a beauty wholly of expression . . . must needs, and very soon, bear the palm from a beauty of quietude, vigour, and peace." This is the very secret of Mr. Irving's attraction. His art is an art of colour, not of form, and in that it follows one of the strongest art tendencies of the day. He has acquired what Mr. Matthew Arnold calls "delicacy and distinction;" "repose and faultlessness" he will never attain.

It is impossible to doubt that his influence on the English drama is on the whole for good. What is most to be regretted in his policy of management has recently been hinted at by Lord Lytton, in his remark that whereas

Macready drew around him a circle of original writers, Mr. Irving confines his efforts almost entirely to the drama of the past. Mr. Wills is practically the one modern writer who ever finds his way to the Lyceum stage, and he is of all living playwrights the least modern. Will Mr. Irving never turn his attention from revival to creation? \* Some time ago he promised a drama founded on the fate of Robert Emmett, but nothing has since been heard of it. At a juncture like the present, a play on such a subject might, by the grace of the Lord Cham-

\* It was rumoured some time ago that Mr. Boucicault had followed Sardou's example, and dramatized "Don Quixote" for Mr. Irving. I have for years speculated as to the possibility of such a play, for, *if* it be possible, Mr. Irving is the man of all others to show us the Knight of La Mancha as he lived and moved. Dramatizations of fiction, and especially of *such* fiction, are, as a rule, to be deprecated; but Mr. Irving's qualifications for the character are so remarkable that Cervantes, in creating it, seems almost to have had him in his prophetic eye.

berlain, take away from our theatre the reproach of total irrelevance to the practical interests of society. But there are a hundred other serious themes which might be treated in plays suited to Mr. Irving's style of art, if he would but show as much courage in the future as he has shown tact in the past. He, if any one, is in a position to give us a serious modern drama which shall influence national life and thought beyond the circles of dilettantism.



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